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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# THE PARADOX OF THE FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN FUNDAMENTALIST MOVEMENTS

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**ABSTRACT:** Throughout the world, religiously-oriented conservative political movements are well known for their defence of 'traditional models' in terms of both family conception and gender roles. Therefore, one should expect to find a limited social and political mobilization of women within them as well as in right-wing religiously conservative parties. However, many significant movements have built strong female branches in which militants usually perform roles apparently contradicting the religious conservative ideologies the movements support. This paper will show these dynamics in three case studies: the US Christian Right in the USA, the Hindu national religious movement (*sangh parivar*) in India, and the Islamist movement in Turkey. Its final section will compare the three cases, trying to find common patterns and to understand the reasons behind this apparent paradox.

**KEYWORDS:** fundamentalist movements, gender roles, participation, religion, women

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## **1. Introduction**

A crucial event of the contemporary era has been the global wave of religious resurgence begun in the 1970s (defined by Gilles Kepel as “the revenge of God”) (Kepel 1991), in which the rise of religious fundamentalism throughout the world has played a major role. This latter has been widely portrayed in literature: as a reaction to the marginalization of religion in society, as a feature of an alleged clash of civilizations, as an effect of globalization, as a phenomenon of totalitarianism, and in several other, different ways. However, scholars dealing with religious fundamentalism from a ‘mainstream’ social science perspective (that is, outside the field of gender studies) have rarely and scarcely investigated the impact of the phenomenon on gender relations and roles. Indeed, this subject is often utterly neglected even in long and detailed works (Ozzano 2009).

As shown by the first part of this paper, devoted to the comparative academic works on the relation between religious fundamentalism and gender, fundamentalism is usually defined as “patriarchal” and centred on the dominance of male activists and their cultures, with negative consequences for the recognition of women’s freedoms and civil rights. Although this fact is undisputable, this paper aims at showing that fundamentalist movements (that are against the cultural underpinnings of modern society, but are not *per se* a traditionalist phenomenon) (Lawrence 1989) can sometimes paradoxically – and usually not intentionally – provide spaces for the enhancement of women’s role. This paper will try to investigate this hypothesis, through the analysis of three cases of fundamentalist movements: the Protestant case in the US, the Islamic case in Turkey, and the Hindu case in India. The focus will be, particularly, on female organizations acting within these movements, as well as the new roles women raised in traditionalist backgrounds are able to play in them and, consequently, in society and politics by large. The conclusions of the paper will assess the cases in comparative perspective, trying to find out common patterns among them, particularly about the factors behind the rise of female activism in the latest decades.

## **2. The State of the Art**

The fundamentalists’ restrictive points of view about gender relations and the role of women in family and society are usually explained by scholars through the movements’ anti-modernist attitude, which makes them accept some material benefits of modernity, while utterly rejecting its cultural and ideological orientation (including women emancipation). However, the explanations differ according to the different variables taken into account.

In some cases, the restrictions on the role of women are contextualized in terms of consequences of modernization processes, entailing migrations from rural to urban areas, the creation of smaller, often nuclear family units, and changes in gender roles (especially because of women’s desire to work). According to Helen Hardacre, those who feel deprived of the privileges and opportunities related to modernity are ripe for conversion to fundamentalist creeds, since:

Fundamentalism promises to restore the family to put the nation on a course that aligns it with divine purpose, and to establish a social order in which life can be lived morally, meaningfully, and in accord with divine will. Fundamentalist groups are not, however, in a position to reverse urbanization, industrialization, the immiseration of the countryside, the creation of an urban proletariat, or the nucleation of the family. [...] fundamentalists have found themselves most able to affect significant change in interpersonal relations, especially within the family. (Hardacre 1993, 138).

According to this point of view, the focus fundamentalists put on the family and interpersonal relations can be explained as a reaction to their failure in implementing a religiously oriented political and economic order (Helie-Lucas, 1994). Such attempts to explain gender inequalities in some religious traditions according to socioeconomic variables, are often based on a Marxist perspective, according to which gender inequalities have to be understood in historical perspective, and are necessarily connected to class inequalities (with a parallel between oppressed gender and oppressed classes) (Naher 2005, 19-20).

A different attempt to explain the fundamentalist attitude towards women in historical perspective – in cultural rather than socio-economic terms – is proposed by Mansoor Moaddel, who argues that the post-colonial societies entailing a liberal idea of gender relations have been marked out, during their development, by a relatively pluralistic social and political context. On the contrary,

The rise of counter-feminist ideas in the Islamic fundamentalist movement in Iran was related to the monolithic discursive context that was under the exclusive domination of the Westernizing bureaucratic authoritarian state. In contrast with nineteenth-century India and Egypt (and also with Iran in the period before the 50s), the dominant ideas and concepts that informed the works of virtually all the opposition groups were the notions of imperialist conspiracy and the Pahlavis being its executive agents. The gender reforms promoted by the Pahlavis were perceived not in terms of women's freedom but as a machination to destroy the indigenous culture. [...] If the removal of the restrictions on women's bodies and the unveiling was perceived as a Western scheme to invade the country's culture, then women's bodies were to be covered so that the culture and the home were protected from the invading foreign forces (Moaddel 1998, 127-128).

A more widespread idea is however that women's subjugation derives from the fundamentalists' attempt to restructure family according to an idealized (and not rarely invented) tradition, which places women in charge of the home and the well-being of those living within it, while restricting their role in other sectors of society, especially as workers. This purpose can be implemented, for instance, through restrictions on physical movement, dress codes, and rules about mating and sexual conduct.

The role of new social contexts in this kind of processes is highlighted by Martin Riesebrodt, who explains that fundamentalism "is primarily an urban movement [...] not a rural type of religiosity that is imported by migrants into the city, but one that is urban in origin [...] a radical-traditionalist protest movement within the rapidly growing cities by means of which rural migrants are socialized into their new social environment". However, according to Riesebrodt's

thesis, the fundamentalists' vision of the role of women is not merely a reaction or an adaptive process, but also a reaction to the perception of the moral decay of society, entailing "passions, compelling dependencies and materialist greed [which] are revealed in prostitution and pornography, adultery and divorce, music and dancing, the consumption of alcohol and gambling, and crime and class hatred". Such phenomena are connected by fundamentalist movements to

the idea of woman as the potential seducer of man into sin. Female sexuality is an instrument of Satan, which is to be rendered harmless and subdued within a patriarchal family structure. Outside of this institution, however, it poses a danger to the stability of the worldly order and to religious salvation. This point of view necessarily creates a division of roles between men and women, in which men find their gender-specific ("natural") tasks primarily in the public sphere and women find theirs in the home. From sexual difference is derived, however, not only a division of roles, but also [...] a distinct legal status for men and women. This, in turn, is interpreted not as discrimination, but as an expression of the proper consideration of gender-specific attributes (Riesebrodt 1993, 179).

According to this point of view, in the words of another author dealing specifically with fundamentalist Islam,

Men are viewed as having an insatiable sexual desire aroused by the sight, smell, or voice of a woman, thereby distracting and diverting their energy from productive endeavours to wasteful sexual activity. This is best curtailed through gender segregation. Women, on the other hand, are seen as sexual beings with no social role outside the confines of the marital home, unless, of course, it meets with the interest and approval of the husband (Shehadeh 2003, 218).

Riesebrodt's interpretation of fundamentalism as "radical patriarchalism" is not shared by most authors dealing with the phenomenon. However, many scholars highlight the male dominance factor: for instance, Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby point out that the ideology of fundamentalist movements is strongly conditioned by the fact that "charismatic and authoritarian male leaders play a central role" in them (Marty and Appleby 1991b, 826).

Most authors choose to frame fundamentalism as a modern rather than a traditionalist phenomenon, and try to explain within this context also the peculiar role assigned to women within fundamentalist movements. Ernest Gellner, for example, explains that

Contrary to what outsiders generally suppose, the typical Muslim woman in a Muslim city doesn't wear the veil because her grandmother did so, but because her grandmother did *not*: her grandmother in her village was far too busy in the fields, and she frequented the shrine without a veil, and left the veil to her betters. The granddaughter is celebrating the fact that she has joined her grandmother's betters, rather than her loyalty to her grandmother (Gellner 1992, 16).

The idea, in this case, is that women in fundamentalist movements cannot be regarded simply as passive executors of the orders of male leaders, but also as willing subjects, moved by the desire to acquire a different and more elevated social status by abiding by the fundamentalist ideology and rules of conduct.

This process can also take place, however, because of an extensive and elaborated cultural system, in which both the media and education play a crucial role in the socialization of young women, instilling in them the conviction that fundamentalist social norms are desirable. Women can therefore be recruited into fundamentalist movements “by means of numerous sources of information, including sermons in the mosque, popular religious literature, television, radio and cassette exhortations, local study and prayer groups, and discussions sponsored by religious institutions”, while, however, “the most important source of religious influence” is family itself (Marty and Appleby 1991a, 9).

In other works, the choice made by fundamentalists to control women and their bodies is interpreted according a psychological perspective. Karen McCarthy Brown for example relates the fundamentalist motives to the problems raised by the emotional drive of the “embodied, animal selves” connected to the limbic system of the mind. According to this perspective, “fundamentalists’ fear of mortality, and of the flesh in general, also directly fuels the need to control women”, who “tend to carry the projections of all that is undesirable or threatening in human existence: sexuality, emotion, pollution, sin, and mortality” (McCarthy Brown 1994, 188).

Women raised in traditionalist milieus can also be afraid of both moral reprisal and social marginalization, but also (where religious norms can influence laws) punishment if they do not conform to fundamentalist rules. Moreover, as highlighted by Hardacre, fundamentalist movements often provide “extensive networks of patronage and economic support”, which however are available only to those who accept and abide by the fundamentalist vision of society and gender relations. This works as an incentive to accept a religiously oriented worldview, in order to get access to economic resources and social networks (Hardacre 1993, 142).

While most of the ‘classical’ literature on fundamentalism agrees on stressing women’s subordination to men within the movements, only a handful of scholars – such as Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby – highlight the possibility that women may also view “fundamentalist-like movements as vehicles of socioeconomic advancements” (Marty and Appleby 1991a, 9). This is the case, for example, of some Muslim societies, in which wearing a headscarf and proclaiming personal loyalty to traditional norms can be the only way to be allowed to perform activities outside home, and to get an education and a job (White 2002). However, this is a point rarely raised by authors dealing with fundamentalism in comparative perspective.

The more recent literature is somewhat more analytical in its appreciation of the role of women in fundamentalist movements. However, it also mostly fails to provide an accurate account of the phenomenon in comparative perspective (and, even when it did, it did not push the comparison too far in analytical terms [see for example Sharma and Young (2007)]) for several reasons: first, the works published in the 2000s are mostly focused on Islam as a kind of ‘ideal type’ of religious fundamentalism (see for example: Shehadeh 2007; Shirazi 2011; Moghissi 1999), which hinders the development of a comparative analysis; moreover, they are often strongly (although not rarely inadvertently) ideologically biased. On the one hand, this problem is engendered by the ongoing debate between feminists and multiculturalists started in 1999 by Susan Moller Okin with the publication of her essay “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?” (Moller Okin 1999; see also Phillips 2009; Kymlica 2003). In the context set by this

debate, many works aim at demonstrating that woman in Islam is oppressed by a dominant male patriarchal culture or, on the opposite side, that she is “a wholly dignified, spiritually empowered being” (Moghissi 1999, 7), rather than at providing a neutral analysis. On the other hand, the debate on women in Islam has been strongly influenced by the ‘war on terror’, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, where taking a side in that debate often implied taking a side in the struggle between neo-conservative positions favourable to the Western military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and ‘anti-imperialist’ positions opposing them. Even authors trying to assess more impartially the role of women in extremist and conservative religious movements, such as Margot Badran (1995 and 2009) still mostly focus on concepts such as ‘feminism’, that is on female branches of fundamentalist movements demanding more gender equality although within a religiously oriented framework.

According to a different perspective, this paper aims at showing that women’s empowerment within fundamentalist movements is more frequently the unintentional result of strategic moves made by the male leadership of the movements to attract more consensus and militants, often combined with the desire – by younger generations of activists – to become more involved in public life (on a personal empowerment rather than on a rights vindication basis; and often [Schreiber 2008] in open opposition to the feminist idea of woman’s role) without questioning the system of values in which they were raised.

The following sections of this paper will test this hypothesis by analyzing three cases of fundamentalist movements: the Christian right in the US, the Islamist movement in Turkey and the Hindutva movement in India. The first section of each case study will describe the specific ideological tenets founding gender roles discourses within that religious tradition and the gender-related issues put forward by the movements; while the second section will describe the female organizations active within the movements, and the reasons of their political involvement, as well as their development and evolution in time.

### **3. The Christian Case in the United States**

#### **Discourses on Gender and Issues at Stake**

Among conservative and Evangelical Protestants in the US there is no unanimity about gender issues, although virtually all theologians share some basic tenets, stemming from the conviction that the gender discourse must be based on the reading of the Bible as the word of God. According to Susanne Scholz (2005), at least three different stances on gender can be singled out within American religious right. The one which gathers more followers is known as “complementarian” or “traditionalist”. Its followers see the Bible not only as an inerrant sacred source, but also as a kind of practical guide for everyday life, setting genders’ roles and specific tasks. In their view (which they consider not merely as an interpretation among many, but as the only true reading of the Bible) genders were created equal, but each has to perform different social and ecclesiastical roles. Today’s women and men have to re-establish the order lost after the Fall described in the Genesis, by rebuilding a traditional family system based on patri-

archal gender roles: which means that men should “lead and protect” women, but also that women should not serve as ecclesiastical leaders. The supporters of this perspective not only don’t take into account discourses about gender discriminations, but utterly believe that “feminists have been the agents for worse [...] by propagating myths about the oppression of women in America” (Marty and Appleby 1992, 79). This point of view is held – although in less radical terms – also by a second strand of Evangelical theologians, known as “moderate Evangelicals”; however, it is harshly criticized by the minority of so-called “egalitarian” (or feminist) theologians. Although they also claim to anchor their beliefs in an inerrant Bible, their interpretation greatly differs from the one proposed by the complementarians. They criticize discriminatory practices in Evangelical churches, and defend women’s equality in all aspects of life.

Since the majority of Evangelicals supports the idea that genders must have different roles in society, the Christian right movement is strongly focused on gender-related issues, putting forward several issues related to women’s role in family and society: the most relevant among them is undoubtedly abortion, which is indeed “the movement’s first issue priority” (Oldfield 1996, 68). Abortion was the catalyst that spurred many Evangelicals into political actions, after its legalization by the Supreme Court’s sentence *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. Evangelicals, who mostly regard abortion as homicide (and the hundreds of thousands abortions carried out every year in the US as a genocide) have been trying, in the past four decades, to get its abolishment or, at least, more restricting laws about its exercise, although without great success. This effort has been carried out by a significant portion of the Christian right that is known as “pro-life movement”, and by several organizations specifically devoted to this issue, such as the National Right to Life Foundation, the National Pro-Life Political Action Committee, and the American Life League. Within the anti-abortion movement we can moreover find groups, such as Operation Rescue, that don’t refrain to engage in actions such as the blockage of clinics where abortions are carried out, and whose militants have been involved in violence acts, such as the killing of pro-choice doctors (Ginzburg 1993; Juergensmeyer 2000). The Christian right’s rejection of abortion also extends to all those practices involving the destruction of embryos, such as research on stem cells (Ben Barka 2006).

Another gender-related issue, which was crucial in the early phases of the Christian right’s development between the 1970s and the early 1980s, was the struggle against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). This latter aimed to introduce in the US Constitution the principle of equality between men and women. The Christian right feared that the ratification of the Amendment would accelerate the moral decline of the American nation, by increasing the loosening of moral norms, and destroying the tenets of the ‘traditional family’. The militants who engaged in politics for the first time in the 1970s to struggle against the ERA believed that defeating it would have been a way of halting moral decline. The movement against the Amendment was not formed only by men: indeed, its backbone were women and female organizations engaged in the defence of the traditional family (Schreiber 2008). After the defeat of the amendment, the anti-ERA organization continued its activity as the Eagle Forum, led by the Republican female activist Phyllis Schlafly (Murray Brown 2002).

Generally, the Christian right supports a division of labour within family, in which men should work and lead the family, while women should give up their careers and devote themselves to the education of children. Divorce is also utterly rejected – even in cases involving violent acts – as well as homosexuality, while unmarried women are not rarely watched with suspicion (Ben Barka 2006).

### **Female Organizations**

The history of women's involvement in the Christian right starts in the very early phases of this latter's development, when local groups of female activists started to struggle against the ratification of the ERA in their state legislatures. The movement moved on to a national dimension in February 1972, when Phyllis Schlafly, a well-known Republican activist, published an issue of her newsletter with the title *What's Wrong with the Equal Rights Amendment?*. According to Schlafly, the ERA was "'a gigantic grab for power' by a federal government out to destroy the power of state legislatures to make laws on divorce, child custody, inheritance, welfare, and labor", as well as a threat to the economic security of married women (Diamond 1995, 168-169). The idea was that "America was in danger of being destroyed from within by a decline in moral standards. The only hope of saving it was for Christians to work together" (Murray Brown 2002, 81). In 1973, the anti-ERA movements were already active in at least 26 US states. The female struggle against the ratification of the amendment (which would last throughout the 1970s until 1982, when the amendment was finally dropped) coalesced into a movement that represented the first embryo of what later became the pro-life movement (Murray Brown 2002, 81). Schlafly's role in this process was crucial, since she was very clever in putting together dozens of local organizations to form a national, and more powerful, movement, which soon started to be engaged in the debates about other pro-family issues, from abortion to the struggle against feminist books in public libraries. In 1975, Schlafly acknowledged this broader orientation by changing the name of her group from Stop ERA to Eagle Forum, an organization claiming a membership of 50.000 women. The female members of the anti-ERA organizations, according to a study carried out in Texas, were mostly educated and already active in electoral politics. Their ideology was typically right wing, with a widespread belief in the existence of a 'Communist conspiracy', hostility towards an allegedly expanding 'big government', and a strong commitment to traditional religion. In later phases, they were joined by women who had not been previously involved in politics, especially young Christian women belonging to several Evangelical denominations, as well as to the Catholic and Mormon churches (Critchlow 2005). In Murray Brown's words, these women who "had always believed that they should be stay-at-home wives and mothers" came thus to "overcome their reluctance to be involved in politics [...] they had learned in their churches" (Murray Brown 2002, 99).

The debate on abortion also saw the involvement of many female activists on the pro-life side since its very beginning. This was the case of Judie Brown, who (together with her husband Paul) was among the founders of the anti-abortion (later renamed pro-life or pro-family) movement. Brown was among the many Catholic women (Protestants would join the battle in scores only in latter phases) who engaged on the issue after the *Roe v. Wade* sentence and



founded the Life Amendment Political Action Committee, which claimed 68.000 members in the 1970s (Murray Brown 2002, 170).

Another issue that was the focus of female involvement in the early phase of the movement, in the second half of the 1970s, was the struggle against homosexuality. Particularly, there was a significant protest movement against the open display of lesbian sentiments and works of art during the White House-sponsored Conferences on the family taking place during the Carter administration (Murray Brown 2002).

The female branch of the Christian right kept on growing in the following years: a turning point in this process was the creation, in 1979, of Concerned Women for America (CWA), which would claim, only three years later, 235.000 members. Its founder was Beverly LaHaye (wife of Tim, well known ideologue of the Protestant fundamentalist movement), who had already been active in the movement in California since the early 1970s and had been drawn into active politics through her participation in the already mentioned White House-sponsored Conferences on the family. In 1982, after the end of the struggle against the ERA, while Schlafly returned to her interests in foreign and defence policies, LaHaye became the real leader of the female 'wing' of the Christian right, and her organization further grew to claim more than 500.000 members (Utter and Storey 2001, 96). The main policy issues in the agenda of the movement were, again, the campaigns against abortion and homosexuality, while the struggle against ERA faded when the Amendment failed to be ratified by enough State legislations. However, LaHaye started to be engaged also in the international field, by sponsoring the Reagan administration's policies in Central America and, more generally, by criticizing the 'liberal' policies carried out by some United Nations agencies, especially on family issues. A later development of the organization's involvement was the struggle against the recognition of LGBT rights as human rights, as well as the support – shared by George W. Bush's administration – of abstinence-based programs in term of sexual education, while the opposition to abortion, even in cases of rape and incest, extended to the morning-after pill (LaRue 2006).

As a whole, the female participation in the Christian rights organizations and campaigns is today still very significant. However (with the exception of CWA, always led by women) few women hold leadership positions within the movement, since most organizations are led by male activists. Moreover, many female leaders have become engaged in politics together with their husbands (or sometimes their fathers, as in the case of Andrea Sheldon, daughter of reverend Lou Sheldon). A major factor explaining this situation is probably the fact that women raised in traditionalist milieus generally accept the idea of a male-dominated culture: which entails "living a paradox: [...] taking an active public role while promoting the ideal of the stay-at-home wife and mother" (Murray Brown 2002, 272).

#### **4. The Hindu Case in India**

##### **Discourse on Gender and Issues at Stake**

Most of the Indian society, despite the processes of modernization it endured in the latest decades, is still very traditionalist in terms of gender roles. Therefore, it is no surprise that the founders and early leaders of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh – the Hindu movement's leading organization since the 1920s – such as M. S. Golwalkar stated that there was "no reason to specify a distinctive or important role" for a female branch of the Hindu movement (Sarkar 2005b, 178): a movement devoted to the struggle against both British colonialism, and the Muslim minority, perceived as alien to the subcontinent. Notwithstanding, the movement decided to establish in 1936 a female organization named Rashtra Sevika Samiti, in which women were trained to martial arts and to the Hindutva ideology, as their male counterparts active in male organizations also did. The movement leaders, despite their patriarchal orientation, understood women's crucial role for a successful mobilization of society, especially to make contact with other women not yet mobilized, in order to get them teach the Hindutva values to their children. However, female activists' involvement was marked for decades by a very low profile. Indeed,

Even after the Samiti had been founded, M. S. Golwalkar [...] restricted his observations on Hindu women to a 'Call to Motherhood'. The women of upper-caste and middle class families had to manage the home front and to keep it free of individual aspirations, of libertarian tendencies, of democratic relationships within the family. [...] They should teach girls to avoid European dress and not to 'expose their bodies more and more' and their children to resist 'a blind aping of the West'. They should keep alive the observance of sacred occasions and take children to regular visits to the temples. [...] They would thus at once encompass the family, the Sangh and the nation into one single whole which the mother's mediation renders an intimate reality. In Golwalkar's authoritative pronouncements on the women's role, there is a strong accent on learning the value of deference within the family (Sarkar 2005a, 174).

As a whole the ideologues of the Hindu right saw the role of women in opposition to both Western and Islamic values (perceived as alien to India's culture and society), but also to the Indian feminist movement, under development when the Samiti was created. The contact with British ideas had in fact promoted criticism and change within the Hindu traditional society, also regarding the role of women: particularly about the *suttee* (or self-immolation of widows) which had been outlawed in 1829 under pressure by a coalition of British and Hindu reformers (Jones 1988).

The issues at stake in these early phases of the movement were not, therefore, related to the role of Hindu women, but to the opposition against the 'imported' models of womanhood, and their recognition by India's law (through both state secularism and the maintenance of a separate civil code for Muslims, which represents a relevant and durable consequence of British colonialism). Since its inception, the Hindutva movement has therefore called for the establishment of a single civil code and a Constitution based on Hindu values.

Also in order to avoid accusations of communal hatred – especially since the movement had often taken part in and not rarely promoted clashes with the Muslim minority, with thousands of victims – the movement leaders often framed their opposition to the Muslim civil code in terms of women's rights. The most famous event of this controversy was the Shah Bano case, which erupted in 1985 when India's Supreme Court ruled in favour of a Muslim woman's right to alimony in a divorce case (Jaffrelo 1996). After months of massive demonstrations by Muslim organizations in many Indian states, the government led by Rajiv Gandhi eventually succumbed and drafted the *Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act*, which upheld the Muslim position, providing remedies for divorced Muslim women in accordance with sharia law (Noorani 2002). This decision angered the Hindu militants, who believed that the government had betrayed them.

The movement also blasted the alleged kidnappings of Hindu women carried out in order to bring them to the Gulf Arab countries for sexual exploitation: an accusation often raised instrumentally in order to fuel inter-communal hatred (Appaiah 2003, 122).

### **Female Organizations**

The Rashtra Sevika Samiti's founder, Lakshmibai Kelkar, was also its major ideologue, and set its purpose as "the development of women". A development that can, however, happen only within the boundaries of a tradition expecting women "to retain their inherent qualities of motherhood and other associated qualities as well in order to create an integrated nation reviving its ancient glory".<sup>1</sup> According to the Samiti's vision, the decadence of India was brought about by three factors: "the marriage of Hindu men to 'non-Aryan' women [...], the subjugation of Hindu women to Muslim men in the Muslim period, and the reification of Hindu women in the British period" (Bacchetta 2005, 121).

The structure of the organization is shaped according to the RSS model, it is very hierarchical (and subordinated as a whole to the male movement) and based on a geographical ratio. Its basic units, as in the male organization, are called *shaka*: in 1947 they were already 240, attended by 13.000 members; today the organization claims about one million members, spread in at least 16 Indian states, as well as in several foreign countries with a significant Indian diaspora (Bacchetta 2005, 115). The members of each unit meet weekly, and in some cases even daily, to receive ideological and religious indoctrination and to perform paramilitary training in martial arts, archery and sometimes shooting: activities very similar to the ones carried out by the male members of the Hindutva movement. The organization also promotes literacy and knowledge of Sanskrit, and provides welfare, such as medical care, to poor women. However, the organization disapproves changes in women's role within the family, and does not support women divorcing or struggling against their families for their rights.

While in its early years the organization was open mostly to women raised in medium and upper-classes and castes, usually married to RSS members, when the Hindu movement shifted

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<sup>1</sup> Parvathy Appaiah, *Hindutva. Ideology and Politics*, Delhi, Deep & Deep, 2003, p. 122

its orientation toward mass recruitment (which implied, for instance, the rise of people belonging to the lower castes to the higher offices of the main organizations of the movement), the Samiti's strategy changed, too (although the old establishment still retained a lot of power). The organization expanded its recruitment also to lower social classes and to rural areas, by sending militants to establish cultural programs for women in the villages (Bacchetta 2005).

For decades, the women working in the Samiti did not enjoy much room in public space: the fact that they were allowed to meet and to train in martial arts as described above did not mean that they were also allowed to play public and political roles in Indian society and politics. On the contrary, they stayed out of the anti-colonial mass struggles, and were not friendly towards other female movements asking for a change in women's roles. This situation suddenly changed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, in a political phase marked out by an escalation of the communal struggle between Hindus and Muslims, when a new generation of female activists started to make pressures on the organization in order to be allowed to perform more active roles. Around 1989-1990, the new generations of Samiti's members – often in opposition to the old guard, warning against their disruptive influence – started to take a more active role in politics. Thousands of women engaged in politics in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – the right-wing party controlled by the Hindutva movement – and sometimes outnumbered men in the local sections (Jaffrelot 1996). Moreover, new female organizations were founded, such as the Durga Vahini: “a women's organization devoted to nation building”, whose leaders argued that “women should rise above themselves and step outside their kitchens to fight the evils facing society”, also urging women “to fight against dowry, child marriage, atrocities on women” (Appaiah 2003, 124).

The main theatre in which Durga Vahini's members and other female militants were active was the communal struggle against Muslims, in which young female leaders such as the BJP cadre Uma Bharati often stood out for their extremism and pro-violence orientation. Particularly, thousands of young women participated in the 1992 demonstrations culminating in the destruction of the *Babri Masjid* (an ancient mosque located near the city of Ayodhya, believed by Hindus to be the birthplace of the god Ram). Women were also active in the demonstrations taking place throughout India after the event, as well as in the subsequent bloody riots (Sarkar 2005b).

These events marked a real departure from the movement's tradition, since women were for the first time encouraged to take an active role outside their homes. However, women's participation in communal struggles did not turn into demands for a public recognition of their rights and for a change in gender roles, and was carried out without openly questioning a somewhat modernized version of Hindu patriarchalism. Thus, when the RSS leaders decided – also because the BJP had conquered power at the national level after the 1998 elections – to domesticate the mobilization and to enter in a negotiation phase, the activity of the female militants was hindered, too. Their magazine *Jagruti* – in which much of the debate related to women's role in the movement had developed – was discontinued, while public participation was discouraged, with the result that in some cases the membership in female organizations even decreased (Sarkar 2005b). Although after these events the situation cannot return to the *status*

*quo ante*, it is clear that women's role within the Hindu movement is still subservient: which is mirrored by the predominantly male leadership of the main organizations and the BJP party.

## 5. The Muslim Case in Turkey

### Discourse on Gender and Issues at Stake

For decades, Turkey stood out in the Muslim world in terms of recognition of women's rights on a western model: for example, universal male and female suffrage was introduced in the country in 1934. Although one of the basic tenets of the Kemalist modernization programme was the achievement of gender equality, however, the strong patriarchal traditions of rural Anatolia were hard to change, as shown still today by the limited presence of women in the Turkish parliament, and by the laws on property rights, which are still mainly transmitted from father to son (Tekeli 2005).

The Islamist movement is probably the main opponent to gender equality in Turkey, since its supporters perceive the traditional family as the "main source of identity and values", as well as an institution "critical for the preservation and perpetuation of religious values", since "people are defined largely in terms of their familial obligations and responsibilities". In this context, "family is defined largely in terms of patriarchal values and is a male-dominated institution in which women play a subordinate role" (Yavuz 2009, 94-95).

The idea shared by most Islamists is that there can be no conflict between genders, which must be complementary to each other: which implies a refusal to recognize genders' equality, in the conviction that men and women have a different nature and must perform different duties and roles (Arat 2005). Women are therefore expected to be active mainly within the family, as spouses, mothers and housewives, while their activities in the public sphere outside the family are often discouraged. One of the main tenets of the Islamist movement is, indeed, the regulation of women's sexuality, which implies a *de facto* gender segregation encouraging women to stay at home and to wear a headscarf while performing their activities outside home.

It is not surprising, therefore, that since the rise of the Islamist movement in the 1970s, the veiling issue has become the main bone of contention between this latter and the Kemalists. The use of headscarf was not formally banned by the regime, but it was strongly disapproved by secularists as an embodiment of religious values in the public sphere (Zarcone 2004). However, when educated Islamist women started to claim the right to wear the headscarf as a symbol of their identity, regulations against the veiling in universities and public offices started to be enacted. The Islamist movement has always opposed such regulations, regarded as an infringement of women's religious liberties, many Islamist and conservative politicians since the 1980s tried to liberalize its use (Özdalga 1998). The struggle between Kemalists and Islamists is engendered by the fact that the former see the veil as a regressive tradition, hampering both modernization of society and women's dignity, while the latter perceive it as the embodiment of women's true nature, in opposition to Western exploitation of the female body. However, even within the field of the headscarf supporters there are different positions: while it is seen

by many merely as a symbol of traditional gender roles and religious piety, its use is vindicated by many women (often dubbed “feminist-Islamists”) as a mean of emancipation. While in the 1970s and the early 1980s headscarved women in public places were mostly isolated cases, regarded with suspicion by the secular establishment, since the rise of the Welfare Party in the 1990s the veil has become the symbol of women engaged in Islamist politics (Arat 1998).

Beside the veiling issue, other battles carried on by the Islamist movement are connected to gender roles, and, more loosely, to moral issues related to the preservation of the traditional family. For example, the movement has often engaged in campaigns against pornography, prostitution, “immoral” works of art and commercials, and the public display of female underwear in stores (Vertigans 2003). The most radical fringe of the movement even went so far as to harass unveiled women in the streets, and to propose gender segregation in public transportation (Göle 1997).

The fact that a traditional vision of women’s role is still adopted even by many moderate Islamists was proved, according to many, by Prime Minister Erdogan in 2004, when he proposed to reintroduce in the Turkish law the criminalization of adultery in order to protect family values. Moreover, the AKP government has also repeatedly invited Turkish women to bear many children and expressed the wish to abolish the law granting women the right to abortion (Trillion 2005; Ozzano 2012a).

### **Female Organizations**

As already mentioned, since the 1970s some women started to be engaged in the Islamist movement to vindicate their Islamic identity in the public sphere. However, they were quite isolated and, while enjoying the support of their families and religious communities, they were mostly regarded with suspicion and often hostility by secularists, since they “challenged prevailing notions of secularism, democracy, and national identity in the country” (Arat 1998, 126). This behaviour became more widespread from the late 1980s, with the rise of Necmettin Erbakan’s Welfare Party, which represented the first mass Islamist party in Turkey, and was the most voted party in the 1995 parliamentary elections. The Turkish case is indeed peculiar since Islamist participation (both male and female) has usually expressed through political parties, rather than social movements (Ozzano 2013).

Erbakan’s party, although supporting the traditional Islamist stances on gender roles, strongly relied on women in order to reach and mobilize its female constituency. As well as its male counterpart, the female branch of the Welfare party was very hierarchical, with a three-level structure within each Turkish province, allowing the party to exercise a strict control over Islamist women and their vote. The female branch of the party had a tremendous success, so that 377.000 women were registered members of the party in 1997 (just before its closure decided by the Constitutional Court), more that 1/3 of the total party members (Eligur 2010, 197). While at first the cadres of the organization were mostly chosen among the relatives of male members, soon the social basis of the female Islamist movement expanded, to include women coming from different milieus, some even raised in Kemalist families (Arat 2005).

The role of the early activists was also crucial in socializing to Islamist politics other women belonging to traditionalist milieus, who were almost confined within the walls of their houses, and could not be reached by male activists. On the one hand the female organization worked as a bottom-up source of information about the Welfare Party's female constituency, its needs and demands; on the other hand, it was crucial in helping to carry out the welfare and alphabetization activities which formed the backbone of the party's strategy to catch the vote of the poor and dispossessed people (Cajoly 1999). A prominent and well-known activist in those years was Sibel Eraslan, a graduate of the Istanbul Law Faculty, who chaired the Istanbul Welfare Party Women's commission, whose work with a bulk of about 18.000 female militants was decisive for the Welfare Party victory in the municipal elections of 1994. In the interviews, she expressed her firm belief in women's rights, their right to work outside the house and to be provided shelter in case of need. The process of women's mobilization was seen as empowering them to "speak from underneath their veil", from daily life to politics (Arat 1998, 125).

However, after the party's victory in the 1994 municipal elections, and also in the 1995 parliamentary ones, no relevant office was assigned to Eraslan and her comrades, since the top echelons of the party organization were still completely male. In many cases, this exclusion of female militants from offices was justified on the ground of the prohibition to wear the headscarf in public offices. Therefore, a female MP would theoretically be obliged to transgress her religious duties in order to participate in the parliament activities. This problem was effectively shown in 1998, when Merve Kavakçı, a newly elected MP of the Islamist Virtue Party tried to swear in the inaugural session of the parliament wearing a headscarf, and was consequently stripped not only of the parliamentary seat, but also of the Turkish citizenship (Yavuz 2009).

The currently ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), although taking more moderate stances than the Welfare Party, has tried to replicate its successful organization, also in terms of female participation. Thus, it is endowed with a Women's Commission, and with a capillary organization of neighbourhood activists and observers. The party, which can rely on a mass appeal much more effective than the sectarian Welfare Party, has reached an official female membership of over 720.000 in 2007 (Eligür 2010, 146). Although they are trained to the new ideology of the party, focused on "conservative democracy", the duties they perform in society are very similar to those performed in the previous decade by the Welfare Party's activists.

Despite this wide basin of female militants, women are however rarely allowed to perform elite roles. In the AKP governments currently in power, only a handful of women were appointed as ministers and undersecretaries, and mostly only in charge of fields such as education and women's affairs (the traditional duties assigned to women by the Islamist worldview). Moreover, women are also virtually absent from the top echelons of the state bureaucracy (Cagaptay and Perincek 2010; Ozzano 2012b).

## 6. Comparison of the Cases

As shown in the analysis of the cases, the fundamentalist movements taken into account in this work are congruent with the literature in terms of perception of gender roles. All of them share a patriarchal attitude, with a vision of genders not as equal, but as complementary to each other: women have therefore, in their vision, roles and duties in society and family which are different from those assigned to men. While these latter must perform their activities mostly in the public sphere, women are often discouraged from being active as workers or social/political activists, and are supposed to carry on their duties mainly in the private sphere, managing the family and the education of their children. All the fundamentalist movements analyzed in this paper believe indeed that women's role is crucial to preserve the traditional values and models that are associated to conservative theologies. This stance is implemented through a control also of women's sexuality and free choice of partners. In the Muslim case this is made particularly evident by the adoption of a symbolic boundary such as the headscarf, to highlight the inaccessibility of the female body. In this attitude toward genders is moreover often included a nationalist stance, which disapproves 'emancipated' women since such a model is regarded as peculiar of the corrupted Western civilization and its imperialism, in an anti-colonialist perspective. While this discourse is openly made in the non-Western cases such as India and Turkey, we can however find it, under disguise, also in the US case, when Christian fundamentalists blame equality between the sexes as an imposition of a corrupted liberal establishment (which is supposed to control the federal government) which is often perceived as an alien colonizer of the 'true' America, marked out by traditional Christian values.

Among the female groups analyzed in this paper we can also observe some differences. For example, in the US we can find autonomous female organizations, such as Concerned Women for America, as well as a widespread female participation in the mainstream Evangelical organizations, mostly allowing a mixed membership. In India we can instead find a more significant gender segregation, with exclusively male or female organizations (these latter created by permission of their male counterparts). In Turkey, fundamentalist women have instead not founded autonomous organizations, but are active within religiously oriented political parties (that however perform in Turkey many social functions which in other countries are not usually connected to political parties). However, this happens in the framework of a rigid sexual segregation, with separate branches for male and female activists.

In terms of social extraction, the 'early risers' that initiate and form the bulk of the movements are usually middle-class women, not rarely married or otherwise related to male leaders and activists. As the movements expand, their social bases also become more differentiated, with the involvement of women raised in poorer and less educated milieus, but also sometimes raised in liberal and educated social milieus. As for the motives of this involvement, in some cases, especially among women related to male activists, we can find an imitative factor. In other cases, particularly among poor and unlearned women, we can also find the desire to get a



higher social level through social and political activity within the movements, not to forget the benefits in terms of welfare which are sometimes associated to the participation in them. Sometimes, finally, women's mobilization is more identity driven, both in the cases of women raised in fundamentalist milieus who vindicate their identity towards the allegedly corrupted mainstream society, and in the cases of women raised in non-fundamentalist social contexts, willing to mark their distance from the values of their former social milieus by embracing the fundamentalist creed.

The identity factor is particularly interesting in order to assess the issues put forward by female activists. While in their stances and activities we can often find a strong element of protest, this latter is always oriented against the outside world and the secular society, which are seen as an enemy, undermining the values and security of the traditional family, and women's social status itself. The militants see equality between sexes – promoted by the West and/or the secular forces – as a threat to women, their integrity and prerogatives. On the contrary, even they promote the role and dignity of women in ways similar to those adopted by secular feminists, the fundamentalist militants never orient their contestation against the milieu they were raised in, its ideology and organizations. The enemy is always the outside world.

In all the cases analyzed, despite women's massive participation in the movements, they are rarely allowed to occupy directive offices, which are usually a preserve of their male counterparts. Usually, they are only allowed to chair the female organizations and branches, but not mixed organizations (when these latter are allowed). A partial exception to this rule is the US case, where women have chaired in rare cases mainstream Evangelical organizations such as the Christian Coalition. Also in this case, however, female leaders are often related or heir to male leaders. When the movements engage in politics, the massive grassroots female participation again does not turn (once more with the partial exception of the US) into a proportional representation in the top echelons of party cadres, public administration, and political offices.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

The analysis of the cases and their comparison allows us now to put forward an answer to the main question raised in this work: why, if fundamentalist movements are usually patriarchally-oriented and hostile to women's activities in the public sphere, we can find within them massive female branches?

About the motives of female involvement, the cases have shown that women can be willing to imitate their male relatives: this is often the case especially of the early leaders of the female branches of the movements. For women raised in a traditionalist milieu, however, social/political engagement is not simply a matter of duty, but also a way to achieve a more satisfactory social status and to improve their reputation. In most cases, it is the only way for them to perform a role outside the family without being stigmatized by their families and communities. While feminist stances would probably imply a strong reaction by their families, and the exclusion from the social networks they were raised in, this kind of participation allows women to take an

active role usually assigned only to men, without openly transgressing the values and the codes of conduct they were raised in, and being punished for it. Paradoxically, then, through their engagement in the struggle against modernity, they can achieve a social status that is sometimes closer to that of their secularized counterparts than they would probably like to admit.

These factors do not explain, however, why their patriarchally-oriented relatives and mentors allow them to do so: a behaviour that cannot simply be explained by the fact that it is problematic to blame a woman mobilizing in the name of the traditional family and values. The main reason is apparently that movement leaders are well aware that women's engagement is crucial for the success of their mobilization. As explained above, in contexts marked out by gender segregation, only female activists can reach women within their homes in order to spread the fundamentalist message. This kind of process is particularly necessary to the fundamentalist cause especially because of representative democracy, allowing women to vote. In this case, the opportunity to reach women within their homes is crucial to widen not only the movements' social networks, but also the constituency of conservative parties. This instrumental essence of this strategy is proved, on the other hand, by the reluctance to appoint women in directing offices, except in cases in which this is required either by the needs of sexual segregation or by opportunity.

The strategic behaviour of many fundamentalist leaders seems thus to provide a discursive and opportunity structure<sup>2</sup> allowing women willing to attain a higher social status to perform roles in the public sphere that – in traditionalist patriarchal cultures – are traditionally reserved to men, insofar they don't openly put into question traditional values and ideas of gender roles: which engenders the paradox of fundamentalist women, who are allowed to go outside to shout that women should stay at home.

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<sup>2</sup> For the concept of 'opportunity structure', see for example Tarrow (1994).

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